

The Dream of a Transparent Body: Identity, Science and the Gothic Novel

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The body,
Eternal Shadow of the finite Soul,
The Soul's self-symbol, its image of itself.
Its own yet not itself–

(Fragment, ST Coleridge, undated [1810?])

In the history of ideas about the relationship between mind and body, scholars have regarded the eighteenth century as particularly fertile ground. The debates sparked by John Locke's challenge to Cartesian dualism in his account of the self as an amalgam of soul and body were especially significant to the development of modern medicine and social science. The Lockean notion of a self-reflective consciousness firmly situated in the body inspired scientists and philosophers to map the unseen internal life of the human onto the material surface of the body. This attempt is manifested most clearly, for instance, in the popular science of physiognomy, which posited that individual character was embodied in the features of the face. To the modern observer, eighteenth-century physiognomy may appear simply as a case of 'bad science' or as occultism; nevertheless, its underlying principles have much in common with the logic behind the development of not only seemingly tenuous sciences like phrenology or craniometry, but also with more 'reputable' modern disciplines like psychology, criminology and neuroscience. Up-to-the minute technologies and current medical research obviously appear to us as much more legitimate and scientifically sound than their eighteenth-century precursors, but *all* of these sciences offer a surprisingly similar model of self-understanding.

Scholars from across the disciplines tend to do as health researchers W. Michael Bird and Lynda A. Clayton have done: they rank physiognomy as one of several ‘marginal pseudoscientific eighteenth-century developments’ from which (mercifully) we have evolved.¹ To characterize physiognomics and related branches of eighteenth-century science as marginal pseudo-sciences is to obscure how remarkably perennial have been their central tenets. In fact, it is rather surprising that Bird and Clayton would use such a characterization since their research identifies the origins, and traces the development of racial discrimination in medicine. As they otherwise show, it is crucial to recognize the theoretical and methodological continuities between our medical past and our present. The history of modern prejudice cannot be easily dismissed from the history of ideas. Although the branches of social and medical science I have mentioned here – from physiognomy, phrenology and craniometry to criminology and neuroscience – are enormously diverse in many ways, we should not miss the links between them.

On the issue of human identity, these sciences share a foundational premise, have comparable aims and have adopted similar methodological approaches. These sciences conceive of the body as intimately linked to, indeed inseparable from, the mind and/or the ‘self.’ They are underwritten by the belief that the body shapes—if not determines—character, behaviour and intelligence. From this premise, it follows that the body conveys information about such things as pathology, moral depravity, sexual deviance and criminal predisposition. There is great diversity between these sciences and within their specialized branches, yet there are also observable methodological similarities. Ludmilla Jordanova notes that eighteenth-century physiognomists may have been a diverse group, but they all

practiced techniques of ‘inference’ based on the premise that ‘the human body gave rise to signifiers, which systematically led to the signified.’² Jordanova’s observation could just as well apply; it seems to me, to the methodologies of twenty-first century sciences that are likewise motivated by a desire to identify and to understand the bodily signifiers of character, intelligence, emotion or dysfunction. The branches of medicine referred to here may span two hundred and fifty years, but they subscribe in some way to what Richard Gray describes as ‘one of the most persistent fantasies held by the human intellect’: the desire to develop ‘a kind of penetrating interior vision that would infallibly reveal the psychological constitution of any human being.’³ Post-enlightenment science seeks to increase human wellbeing and to secure the social order by rendering the body a more transparent entity. Transparency *has been and remains* a key ideal in the modern Western world.

In light of this aim, it is perhaps not surprising that the scientific tradition I trace here is in some way connected to the gothic — a literary genre that is also tremendously concerned with the relationship between human ‘nature’ and the body, and with the psychological and bodily sources of vice and criminality more specifically. In fact, art historian Victor Stoichita’s description of physiognomy as a science that sought to identify ‘the devil’ within, rather than outside the human body might just as well apply to the gothic novel.⁴ Yet — and this is a crucial point — at exactly the points of overlap between Enlightenment science and the gothic, there is also an important parting of the ways. In contrast to scientific faith in the transparent body, late eighteenth-century gothic novels often represent the body as an *untrustworthy* source of information about the self. As I will argue here, the use

of the body to define the self—as practiced by Enlightenment scientist-philosophers as well as by individuals in everyday life—comes under intense interrogation in 1790s novels, including Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian*, Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* and Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya*. In these texts, individuals are often reduced to a bodily map, and in particular, to a facial map, which gives clues as to personal character, motivation and intention. The faces of gothic characters can communicate and guide, but more often, they mislead and misinform. Through disastrous misreadings, misdiagnoses and mis-identifications, Lewis, Radcliffe and Dacre demonstrate how the practice of conflating body and self is deeply threatening to the notion of 'unique' personhood. The recurring gothic trope of disguise is, as I will show, a particularly revealing literary manifestation of authorial anxieties about attempts to forge an increasingly intimate connection between the codified body and the codified self.

I. Physiognomy and the Transparent Face

There is something remarkable about our seemingly perennial dependency on the face as a principal source of information about human character, motivation and desire. The idea of the face as a system of signs reaches at least as far back as Aristotle and was explicated in such celebrated sources as Giambattista della Porta's *De humana physiognomonia libri IIII* (1586) and Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* (1675). The idea that virtue and vice, criminality and moral uprightness could be mapped on to the body in order to render the world a more transparent place is, however, a particular feature of modernity, born out of Enlightenment rationality and scientific progress. How intimate the connection became between self and body in the eighteenth century is most clearly

demonstrated by Johann Caspar Lavater's extremely popular and influential *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe* (1775-1778), first translated into English in 1789 as *Essays on Physiognomy*.⁵ In this consistently reprinted text, Lavater posited that facial features directly reflected internal character. Physiognomy is:

the Science of discovering the relation between the exterior and the interior — between the visible surface and the invisible spirit which it covers — between the animated, perceptible matter, and the imperceptible principle which impresses this character of life upon it — between the apparent effect, and the and the concealed cause which produces it.⁶

As straightforward as Lavater's definition seems, it reveals more subtle attitudes about the aims of modern human science more generally. Physiognomy identifies parity between the material and the immaterial. That Lavater describes what is imperceptible about the human as 'concealed' conveys not only an anxiety about the opacity that otherwise surrounds human character, but also betrays a deep disquiet about the human capacity for deception (intentional or unintentional). The body — unlike the person — speaks truths.

Visualization, Barbara Stafford reminds us, was absolutely 'central to the processes of enlightening' and Lavater's comments attest to the pre-eminence of sight in the gathering of empirical evidence.⁷ He and his scientific contemporaries consistently emphasized the key role visual recognition and observation play in knowledge-building. The human body might conceal imperceptible thoughts and desires but the trained eye of the physiognomist had the capacity to perceive information on the skin's surface. 'Material man must become the subject of observation,' Lavater emphasizes time and again, in order to perceive the 'internal essence' that was 'inseparable' from the inhabited body.⁸ An individual could only

‘be wholly known’ through a systematic investigation and a correct visual assessment of ‘his external form, his body, his superficies.’⁹ Versions of this tenet appear consistently throughout the modern period, in the writings of phrenologists, surgeons, anatomists and criminologists.

In Enlightenment thought, sight was most often privileged above other senses, and often above verbal communication. Physiognomists represented speech as a degraded form of human interaction and an unreliable source of information. Speech was subject to what the philosopher of language J. L. Austin famously described as the inherent ‘infelicities’ of communication.¹⁰ The various subdivisions of infelicities that Austin identifies — ‘misfires,’ ‘abuses,’ ‘misinvocations,’ ‘misexecutions,’ ‘insincerities,’ ‘misapplications,’ ‘flaws’ and ‘hitches’ — might be twentieth-century categories, but these blocks to transparent communication are precisely what physiognomy sought to bypass some two hundred years earlier. That physiognomists sought to circumvent the messiness of speech and to overcome the problem of human deception is made clear by one nineteenth-century practitioner who insisted that ‘so intimate’ was the connection between internal thoughts and the external frame ‘that the expression of the countenance’ betrayed sentiments ‘more rapid[ly] than speech.’¹¹

Austin’s vocabulary, with its emphasis on the insincerities and abuses of language, is worth comparing to the metaphorical imagery of physiognomists. Faces are referred to as ‘windows, indexes and monitors’ in Dr Richard Brown’s 1807 treatise, *An essay on the truth of physiognomy, and its application to medicine*, whilst Dr Francois Cabuchet chose ‘mirrors, veils and pictures’ to capture the idea of revealing the soul by charting the face.¹² The talking subject could be

unreliable, dishonest, injudicious or simply misguided – a victim of faulty perceptions or simple inattentiveness. But the body, and more particularly the structures and nuances of the human face, allowed for a more sincere, accurate and truthful form of communication. For this reason, any attempts to mask ‘passions and vices’ or ‘to conceal the characteristic expression of villainy’ beneath ‘a virtuous exterior’ were hopelessly futile when confronted by the skilful eye of the physiognomist.

Physiognomy manuals invariably included an extensive array of visual illustrations, with accompanying analyses of faces and heads. Keen to demonstrate his science in action, Lavater included numerous portraits, prints and silhouettes of individuals from various nations and eras, famous and unknown, admired and despised. Below are only two of many examples:



Plate 1



Plate 2

The image on the left is an engraving of the founder of modern human anatomy, Andreas Vesalius, a figure for whom, rather unsurprisingly, Lavater had very positive

things to say: 'How seldom do we meet such firm, decisive, precision' in 'such penetrating eyes,' he writes, and a nose that 'denotes ripe, masculine, understanding, or rather a sound mind!'¹³ For Lavater, there could hardly be a 'more sublime, more godlike enjoyment, than that of understanding a noble human countenance' like that of Vesalius. In sharp contrast, he reads nothing but 'deformity' in the face of the anonymous individual in Plate 2. Who he wonders, could observe the protruding mouth and the slackened skin and 'not here read reason debased; stupidity almost sunken to brutality?'¹⁴

Beside the multitude of issues raised by such commentary, these pronouncements demonstrate a profound refusal to leave things, as Lavater says, 'to blind chance and arbitrary disorder.'¹⁵ Arbitrariness and opacity were the 'bane' of scientific pursuits and were the sworn enemies of that quintessential Enlightenment figure, the 'enquirer.' To fail to exploit the body for knowledge was to leave things shrouded in the unknown; to allow chance to have the upper hand was to jeopardize peace, order and productivity. In other words, Lavater's project was very much grounded in some of the most critical Enlightenment debates. As has been mentioned, physiognomy launched a serious challenge to Cartesian dualism and weighed in on both sides of the nature-nurture debate. In Lavater's science there is not a tension between biologically inherited traits and acquired (or habitual) characteristics. On the one side, the body revealed *innate* biology over which the individual had no control; on the other side, the body (or the face more specifically) was a sort of Lockean *tabula rasa* upon which experience, habit and environment left indelible traces. 'The endowments of nature may be excellent; and yet, by want of use, or abuse, may be destroyed'; Lavater reminds readers, 'virtue

beautifies, vice deforms.’¹⁶

In this respect, there are remarkable similarities between Lavater’s project and the projects of gothic novelists for whom on the one hand, cultural environment — nurture — played a key role in creating the tyrant or the offender, but on the other, perceived of criminality as a physiological dysfunction. In Charlotte Dacre’s *Zofloya*, for instance, the narrator tells us that immorality and criminality stem from ‘inclinations naturally vicious’ as well as ‘the contamination of bad example.’¹⁷

Physiognomy brings together the physiological, the psychological and the environmental; great weight is placed on the role of biology and destiny, as well as on cultivation, education, experience and choice. The face records one’s biologically-determined qualities but it also becomes inscribed by experience. The crucial point, for both physiognomists and gothic novelists, is that verbal signs fail where physical ones succeed. Regardless of whether specific aspects of individual character are innate or acquired, the body demonstrates truths about the self that the individual could not – or would not – articulate.

The transformation of the human face into a transparent organ is in many ways an optimistic enterprise. It is unsurprising that Holcroft’s translation of Lavater’s *Essays* became popular in the 1790s, a decade in which transparency — between individuals, and between citizens and government — was a key goal of revolutionaries and reformers who were weary of intrigue, partiality and deception. Indeed, *Essays on Physiognomy* reads like a cultural by-product of revolutionary efforts to establish a republic of virtue in France; by the same token, it could as easily be compared to the conservative manifestos of British reactionaries who were intent on warning their compatriots that they must morally reform or face

political ruin. The rhetoric of moral improvement is given full expression in Lavater's efforts to submit the body to an infallible formula. To those who witnessed the revolution's nasty turn in the mid-1790s, this formula would have offered something else, too: a 'scientific' buttress against irrationality, violence, atheism and immorality – whether those things were associated with plotting revolutionaries, unruly members of the mob or power-hungry tyrants. The Terror had seemed to demonstrate how law-abiding citizens could seemingly metamorphose overnight into merciless mobs, but Lavater's methods offered a secure defense against chaos in a world that suddenly seemed more than capable of descending into violence, unreason and excess. As Barbara Stafford observes, the practices of 'categorization, systematization, and standardization' must have appeared to prevent the "scientific" physiognomist from being overwhelmed by the mob' or alternatively, 'by the Romantic intricacy and multiplicity' of poet-philosophers.¹⁸ By removing the veil of opacity – behind which individuals exercised arbitrary power, hid violent impulses, practiced the arts of deception or let their fervent imaginations run wild – physiognomy promised to accomplish one of the unfulfilled aims of the revolution. It promised to make human relations more transparent, more rational, more ordered and more secure.

II. Deceitful Bodies and Gothic Disguises

In the gothic novels of this period, the dangers associated with opacity are made manifest in the recurring character of the shrouded monk or Inquisitor. By 'muffling' his face behind a religious cowl, this anti-Enlightenment figure makes truthful communication impossible and renders the world incomprehensible. Opacity allowed such individuals to exploit their capacity for deception, to fully

express their will to power and to tyrannize the vulnerable. Monks are remnants of the dark, superstition-filled days preceding the enlightened Age of Reason. In Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian*, the disguised face of the evil monk Schedoni makes it impossible for virtuous characters to make moral determinations. The novel's hero Vivaldi 'had never distinctly seen a single feature' of Schedoni's face, thus he is unable to judge 'of the likeness, as to countenance' and therefore unable to evaluate character and motive.¹⁹ Monk's cowls give 'an artificial effect ... to the head,' making them indistinguishable and undifferentiated (49). When Vivaldi faces the most powerful officers of the Inquisition, he is struck by how 'their faces were entirely concealed beneath a very peculiar kind of cowl, which descended from the head to the feet' so that 'their eyes only were visible through small openings contrived for the sight' (310). He is unable to reason or to appeal to human affect. The shrouded face is directly connected to discipline, punishment and power: the more extensive a monk's sartorial covering, the greater his ability to disguise himself; the greater the disguise, the greater the ability to exploit people's irrational terrors and misguided beliefs; the greater those fears, the more extensive the monk's exercise of arbitrary power. The cowl demonstrates how, in the face of religious superstition and political corruption, sight fails, moral judgment falters, communication is impossible, knowledge is faulty, and the personal exercise of reason is not a viable option.

Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* might be set in 'medieval' Catholic Spain, but like other gothic novels of the period, it presents a distinctly modern vision of the failure of Enlightenment. Although Lewis's monk Ambrosio is ostensibly a product of medieval authoritarianism, superstition and irrationality, he should be read as the

product of an Enlightenment moral economy. Of course, it is typical of the gothic to use the past to speak about the present, and this is the case here. Ambrosio is an exemplar of modern fears about authority not unrelated to the insidiously subtle forms of power that Michel Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish*. As an orphan left to the care of monks, the child Ambrosio begins as nothing and his body is soon rendered 'docile,' to use Foucault's term.²⁰ He is so thoroughly 'made' into a morally-accountable, self-disciplining individual that 'his rule of self-denial extended even to curiosity.'²¹ Inquisitiveness leads to the tasting of forbidden fruit and a whole world of sin, but revealingly, Ambrosio at first curbs the desire 'to see the face of his pupil' Rosario by imposing upon himself a whole range of disciplinary measures, including 'mortification of the flesh' (65, 47).

In this way, Ambrosio appears as a model of modern restraint and good order, but operating just outside of or below the radar of Enlightenment rationality, he is ruled by a Sadean nature that balks at the constraints of reason and order. With respect to discipline and the body, the Marquis de Sade should be seen as Ambrosio's exemplar. Sade's life and writings are a revolt, as Rebecca Kukla observes, against 'any attempt to set up a normative tribunal' that would supersede or overrule 'the immediate concreteness' of his bodily impulses.²² In similar fashion, Ambrosio ultimately refuses to be contained by a rationality necessarily abstracted from sexual desire: he violently rejects ritualized control and his once-docile body revolts against his adopted methods of self-discipline. Lewis uses a material, physiological language to capture the 'truth' about Ambrosio: he is, we are told, 'naturally addicted to the gratification of the senses, in the full vigour of manhood and heat of blood' (319). It is as if his internal, unmediated self is

suddenly revealed. His natural — because bodily — desire overrides culture, reason, religion, morality and even fear of punishment. It is Ambrosio's '*constitution*,' the narrator informs us, that 'made a woman necessary to him' and later inspires extreme sexual violence (213). He is an incarnation of the belief that crime and unrepentant vice originate from somewhere deep within the biological makeup—an idea that motivated (and continues to motivate) the search for biological bases of criminality and aggression – and has given rise to sciences from physiognomy to neuroscience.

Without the aid of science, the monk's motives and actions—shrouded as they are in religion, superstition and arbitrary authority—would remain unreadable and thus untreatable. Ambrosio is a failure of the socializing, civilizing and rationalizing processes of the Enlightenment. Like other gothic monks, he is a reminder that the existence of a just society requires that human 'nature' be subject to moral, legal and scientific examination and regulation. 'Either every thing is subject to order and law,' Lavater writes, 'or nothing is so.'²³ As such a statement indicates, the process of subjecting the individual to laws of order are intimately bound up with scientific projects that, like his own, seek to regulate those who refuse to self-regulate. As a disguised figure, he is a counterpoint to other gothic characters who are marked by their transgressions. The ageless wandering Jew of *The Monk* is marked by 'a burning Cross impressed upon his brow' as a sign not only of his criminality, but also as a reminder that the ancients relied on divine intervention and spiritual insight to identify their dissidents (260). In contrast, only science offered modern societies a verifiable, empirical and institutionalized means of identifying criminals like Ambrosio. Once individuals were laid open to the

probing scientific eye, they would be exposed for what they really were: threatening offenders who were driven by dysfunctional and *unseen* urges originating from the depths of their bodies.

III. What Lies Beneath: Uncovered Faces

In a process of disclosure, gothic writers like Lewis, Radcliffe and Dacre expose the reader to what lies beneath cowls, cassocks, cloaks and veils. In different ways, their novels reverberate with Edmund Burke's unhappy observation that one of the goals in the 'new conquering empire of light and reason' was to 'rudely' tear off all 'the decent drapery of life.'²⁴ These novelists penetrate the aura of authority and religiosity and peer beneath the veil of class privilege, familial honour and cultural tradition. Aristocrats and monks are stripped of their drapery to reveal the reality of the shivering, naked, ugly humanity beneath.

In the gothic novel, there are also other, very different types of 'unveiled' individuals: the bare, open and vulnerable faces of the dead. Dead faces are a gothic trope, which present a startling view of the processes of identification, subjection, communication and transparency. Dead faces, in stark contrast to the hidden faces of monks, speak volumes. In *The Italian*, the silent, unmoving, unspeaking face of the murdered aunt Bianchi communicates much more than when animated and alive. When Vivaldi discovers her dead body, her 'livid face' inspires an affective reaction: he feels empathy, his memories are stirred, his affections and loyalties are strengthened (55). More apropos to the focus of this discussion, Bianchi's transparent face also provides criminological evidence. When a black tint spreads over her features, her face testifies to her poisoning and begins a process of investigation that will lead ultimately to justice (or some form of it).

This uncovered, undisguised face, then, is a means for achieving things typically seen to be at odds: on the one hand, it forges a purely emotional human connection; on the other, it provides the empirical evidence necessary to determine guilt and innocence.

In *Zofloya*, the disfigured features of Berenza testify to his poisoning by his formidable wife Victoria, another Sadean character driven to sexual excess and violent crime. In this instance, Berenza's dead body becomes a text, inscribed with evidence of the crimes committed against it. On 'his peaceful and unconscious bosom,' Victoria observes 'large spots of livid green and blue' — a circumstance that strikes her

almost senseless with overpowering dread! not the dread of public justice, so much as the dread, horrible to her, that the discovery, or suspicion of her guilt, would prevent, *before death*, the accomplishment of her criminal wishes.²⁵

As becomes the case with *Ambrosio*, there are no longer any internalized disciplinary mechanisms at work in Victoria's psyche. The offender has become conscienceless and the only restraint is a fear of unfulfilled desires and thwarted ambitions.

One of the key points here is that the body provides forms of evidence that supersede language, often in astonishing ways. This principle is demonstrated in *Zofloya* when the poisoned Berenza's veins are opened in a last ditch attempt to save him from what seems like a mysterious pathology. As the family wait with bated breath around his bedside, his blood first fails to flow, then dramatically squirts from his vein and splatters across the face of his wife: 'The avenging blood of Berenza had fixed upon his murderer, and hung its flaming evidence upon her

cheek!’ so that Victoria ‘dare not lift her eyes, lest those of others should read in them the self-written characters of guilt.’²⁶ When she finally does raise her face, her eyes settle upon her accomplice, the satanic Zofloya, in whose own eyes she ‘reads the desperate and gloomy fierceness of determined crime.’ Even in utter silence, then, the face speaks. Such is the case, too, in *The Italian*: silence reigns when the attending physician and Vivaldi make the same quick diagnosis as to the cause of Bianchi’s death. Understandably apprehensive about the ramifications of publicizing his findings, the doctor chooses not to articulate them. It is only through a purely ocular exchange that Vivaldi ‘reads’ the truth about his own suspicions in the medical man’s countenance (55).

The face provides irrefutable evidence that cannot be expressed fully, accurately or honestly in speech. The face is more truthful and less ambiguous than the speech of the deceitful, the naïve, the unsuspecting, or the simply obtuse. As a manifestation of that unreliable phenomenon — human intention — language is not to be relied upon. These scenes gesture toward the post-mortem autopsy and the increasing reliance on the body as criminological evidence. They demonstrate a desire to develop a science that would ‘gradually push[] back the veil,’ to use historian Bettyann Holtzmann-Kevles’s apposite phrase, thereby revealing the internal pathologies, vices and crimes that lay below the body’s surface, yet nevertheless left some trace upon it.²⁷ In her study of twenty-first century medical imaging, José van Dijck echoes Holtzmann-Kevles’s remark, noting how medical techniques that allowed doctors (and the public) to see further into the human body seem ‘to lift the veil of yet another secret of human physiology.’²⁸ The representation of medicine as the sole or at least the principal means of uncovering

the mysteries of the body is a seemingly perennial trope used as much by the Enlightenment physiognomist as the twenty-first century neurobiologist.

IV. Cases of Mistaken Identity: Surface vs. Depth in the Gothic Novel

So far, I have attempted to map some of the rich scientific context of the late eighteenth-century gothic novel. Although fairly brief, I have drawn what I see as important connections between scientific and novelistic treatments of human identity and methods of identification, but I want to focus now on an ambiguity in this connection. There seems to be something very much at odds between on the one hand, physiognomical and phrenological emphases on bodily depth and on the other, the critical argument that the eighteenth-century gothic novel is a literary genre predominantly concerned with ‘surface’ rather than with ‘depth,’ particularly with respect to characterization. How do we reconcile (if we can) these seemingly disparate approaches to the question of human identity — one scientific (depth) and one aesthetic (surface)? In other words, what is the relationship between the physiognomist’s approach to personhood and that of the gothic novelist? This is a particularly provoking question since these are not mutually exclusive approaches: gothic writers often also advocated physiognomy.

Several scholars have interpreted the seeming ‘flatness’ or superficiality of character and the often limited physical description of those characters, as evidence that eighteenth-century gothic writers saw identity not as an expression of individual essence but as a blend of a number of social or public identities. Eve Sedgwick argues that Radcliffe and Lewis’s gothic characters lack full, individualized personalities; they only become defined as social types against others who are their physical, and thus temperamental and moral opposites. Moreover,

she describes how the process of establishing identity relies on visual recognition. Personal character 'is at no moment inherent,' she explains, but is constructed through 'a process of visual assimilation'; in addition, identity is established belatedly, occurring 'only with the retracing or recognition of pairs of marked countenances that are ocularly ... compared with each other.'²⁹ The intimate connection between 'marked countenances' and identity that Sedgwick identifies here corresponds to the same connection in treatises on physiognomy. The same emphasis on sight, perception and visual transparency that typifies Enlightenment science also underpins eighteenth-century gothic novels.

However, there are some important differences between scientific and literary approaches to personal identity. Although both rely on readings of the body, an important difference exists around the issue of sight: unquestionably, sight plays a dominant role in processes of identification in the novel, yet I would argue that processes of visual assimilation are presented as deeply problematic. In *The Italian*, *The Monk* and *Zofloya*, processes of visual identification, whether based upon physiognomy or physiology (i.e. surface or depth), often prove dangerous. The formation of personal identity based upon material evidence, whether that evidence is gathered from external appearance or from the internal biological structure of the human, is always in danger of reducing the person to a sum of his or her parts. In other words, the gothic reacts against scientific methods of rendering bodies transparent in order to define the person.

Earlier, we saw how dead bodies in gothic novels could reveal truths about crime and character. However, these clear-cut readings of the body are complicated by still other cases of criminal death — cases in which the faces of the dead are *not*

as transparent as those of Bianchi or Berenza. In *The Monk*, Ambrosio administers a drug that renders the innocent Antonia temporarily lifeless so that when 'a mortal paleness' covers 'her features,' she appears as 'a corse to every eye' (317, 283). When both the medical and the wider community misdiagnose these signs as signifiers of death, the body is freely released to Ambrosio, ostensibly for her burial; ironically, this misdiagnosis makes possible her subsequent rape and real death. Almost simultaneously in the narrative, the prioress of St Clare poisons the unmarried, pregnant Agnes as punishment for sexual transgression. This second misdiagnosis reveals a striking gap between scientific evidence and 'truth': the poison 'left no marks upon her body' and Agnes is likewise pronounced dead (301). These gaps render her vulnerable to the masochistic power of a tyrant who jails and tortures her in the catacombs where Antonia also faces her violent end.

What do we make of these important scenes? Here, the uncovered and vulnerable faces of the dead do *not* speak, or more accurately, they are as infelicitous and as deceptive as speech can be. These scenes of misdiagnosis demonstrate that the relationship between empirical science and the open, transparent, legible body is not always as positive as the case of Bianchi might suggest. These scenes disturb the notion that body and person coincide as directly and as comprehensively as materialists, physiognomists and phrenologists would suggest. In an earlier section, we saw how the disguised and thus unreadable bodies of monks create opportunities for crime and abuses of power; in another section we witnessed how the open body could assist in the identification of such perpetrators of crime. Yet in the poisoning cases of Antonia and Agnes, even when the body is bared to the penetrating eye of science, it does not uncover 'truth.' In

fact, this chain of events throws into question the ability of biological analysis to identify criminality, dysfunction and pathology, for it seems that the clues to Ambrosio's sexual desires, Victoria's thirst for power and Schedoni's longing for domination are *not* written on the body. Rather, human character, drives and desires can be understood much more effectively through knowledge of their circumstances, education, personal history and life narratives. Moreover, immorality, deviance and crime are not the result of science or social institutions failing to control or understand the body; rather immorality, deviance and crime are a result of those institutions *themselves*.

To grasp the significance of these gothic scenes of misdiagnosis, we need to locate them in the context of contemporary anti-materialist and anti-phrenological writing. In *The Evidences against the System of Phrenology* (1828), Thomas Stone argued that monstrous historical figures like Robespierre and Marat were effectively created by their environment – in this case, the chaotic, fearful, paranoid world of revolutionary politics. Throughout history, humans demonstrated their capacity for violence and cruelty, but this was a consequence of circumstance, not biology:

The desire and propensity to destroy will be found, in every instance, to be a feeling suggested and excited by the influence of incidental circumstances, and the prevailing spirit and temper of the times, *rather than the result of a particular configuration and development of a certain part of the brain*, urging the individual, by its *mechanical* activity, to the commission of the most atrocious crimes.³⁰

Stone's use of the popular word 'mechanical' to describe the activity of the brain is important. Used to describe the dehumanizing effect of modern medicine and philosophy, Thomas Carlyle employed it to great effect in his influential essay 'Signs of the Times.' The early nineteenth century, with its political economists,

utilitarians, anatomists, materialists and surgeons was the dawn of 'the mechanical age.' These modern figures reduced morality, heroism, imagination and human relations to a formula; under their aegis, the individual disappeared into an undifferentiated mass. Carlyle's criticisms of materialist medicine in particular give us a keen sense of what was at stake in the scenes of gothic misdiagnoses we have looked at here. By attempting to reduce humanness to purely physical processes, medics were effectively rendering the human body, the house of the immortal soul, into something merely 'material and mechanical.'³¹

IV. Gendered Faces: Subjectivity and Subjection

Physiognomists often insisted that their science made sense, quite simply, because it had developed from people's natural inclinations. 'Nothing is more prevalent,' one American physiognomist observed in 1841, 'than the formation of judgments from the appearances of the face.'³² At the same time however, the average person was not equipped to interpret the subtle and often concealed signs contained there. Enlightenment science may appeal to common sense; at the same time, scientists were needed to correctly interpret and mediate the natural world. 'The Enlightenment semiotic ideal of natural signs is readable only to the physiognomist,' John Lyon observes, since 'signs appear arbitrary' to individuals lacking insight.³³ Of course, interpretation of nature is always in some way 'contaminated' by the cultural mindset of practitioners, as is confirmed by Lavater's forthright claim that physiognomy was 'judgement reduced to practice.'³⁴ Science (like art, like politics) is always in danger of enforcing and promoting pre-existing biases whilst veiling such biases in disinterestedness, neutrality and nature. This is precisely what everyday judgements and scientific claims share: they are buttressed

by naturalized attitudes about gender and race, intellect and ability.

Eighteenth-century attitudes about sexed bodies are particularly and purposefully exaggerated in *The Monk*: when Ambrosio drugs and rapes the young Antonia, he blames her — and more to the point, her appearance — for her own shameful ‘dishonour.’ ‘Whom am I to thank for this,’ he cries when he reflects on his horrific crimes, ‘Fatal witch! Was it not thy beauty? Have you not plunged my soul into infamy? Have you not made me a perjured hypocrite, a ravisher, an assassin?’ (321-22). Not content to blame the victim, and notwithstanding the claim that his own constitution drove him to extreme sexual exploits, he also turns on his spurned lover and accomplice Matilda. Ambrosio’s charge is a vivid articulation of his society’s prevailing gendered attitudes; such naturalized cultural views permeate scientific enterprise, if often much more subtly. It is particularly significant that he holds her beautiful face responsible for his initiation into criminality. ‘Would to God,’ he exclaims, ‘that I had never seen your face!’ (326).

Specifically, woman’s face becomes a means of her subjectification, her subjugation to the sexual constitution of man, and in the gothic novel, it legitimizes her violent death. Such dramatic events may seem rather far-removed from medical science, but they have clear similarities with ideas about biological destiny and concomitant social roles. For early nineteenth-century phrenologists, it was a biological ‘fact’ that men were superior in intellect, whilst women were generally superior in what were referred to as the animal feelings. Conflating common sense with hard science, the physician and phrenologist Johann Spurzheim directed his readers to consider their own daily experience: “‘females often say to us, that we do not *feel* like them; and we reply, that they do not *think* like us.”³⁵ Surely, such

commonplace observations — as old as time itself — must contain a kernel of truth? Common sense becomes legitimized as scientific fact when Spurzheim enshrines it in the language of comparative anatomy: “The heads of men are thicker on the sides than the heads of females, and longer from the ear to the top of the forehead;” he informs his readers, “whilst the heads of females are flatter on the sides’ with ‘a *larger portion of brain from the ear to the occiput.*”’ This is more than significant because, as one of Spurzheim’s opponents points out, ‘Amativeness, Combativeness, Philoprogenitiveness [fecundity and an inherent affection for children], Love of Approbation and Esteem, reside’ in this portion of the brain. Differences in the size and bone density of the skull between the sexes allegedly indicate inherent intellectual and emotional difference; in turn, such ‘natural’ difference dictates gender-specific social roles.

The kind of knowledge articulated by Spurzheim, both learned and popular, elucidates Ambrosio’s fetishization of Antonia and Matilda (and the latter in her guise as the boy-novice Rosario) in *The Monk*. The circulation of such ideas also makes sense of Radcliffe’s veiled women: they find a reprieve not only from a male gaze but a medicalized male gaze. Performing a very different function than the monk’s cowl, in Radcliffe’s novels women’s veils protect (at least in part) against precisely the type of gendered subjection that occurs in *The Monk* and is manifest in Spurzheim’s writings. Radcliffe’s veils are a reaction against deeply embedded gendered attitudes and behaviours that cast women as seductresses, reduces them to a sum of their female parts and holds them responsible for the fall of men. Radcliffe’s veils could be seen; it seems to me, as symbols of protest against what theorists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari term the ‘inhumanity of the face.’³⁶ The

cultural phenomenon they refer to is the lack of control that individuals have over the ways their faces are used to define them – to *subjectify* them. Arguably, this is especially so in the case of women: the historical pressure on women to present a beautiful but modest face, for example, gives some indication of how overwritten or culturally-codified the female body is. Human subjects do not choose their faces, Deleuze and Guattari write, ‘it is faces that choose their subjects.’³⁷

Radcliffe’s veils thwart processes of subjectification. Her veils impede the kind of scopophilic fetishism that establishes the dominance of the masculine subject over the female object, delineates appropriate female roles, establishes norms of attractiveness and defines woman’s ‘natural’ physical and mental capabilities. In *The Italian* especially, the veil prevents the female face from being fetishized, a process that is ‘inseparable,’ Deleuze and Guattari point out, from the ‘processes of facialization.’³⁸ Fetishism drains the person of humanity, feeling, intelligence and individuality. A veil not only allows Ellena to escape the convent that imprisons her but it also prevents her from ‘being exposed to the examining eyes of strangers’ who would subject her to censure and malice (94). Like the monk’s cowl, the veil is an instrument of disguise that prevents women from being ‘recognized’ or ‘read,’ but unlike the cowl, it facilitates a certain amount of individual self-determination.

Still, the fact remains that the veil offers only an extremely limited means of liberation in Radcliffe’s novels. The veil is *intended* to prevent the type of visual recognition that would erase the wearer’s individuality; the covered face *should* deflect the type of visual access that inspires male arousal and fetishism. Yet, when the heroine Ellena attempts to escape her enemies disguised as a nun, her

habit proves 'an insufficient protection' against 'the penetrating glances' of her oppressors (129). Visuality penetrates below the surface to see the female body beneath, in fact rather paradoxically, the veil erases Ellena's individuality even further, precluding individuation and communication. When she makes her escape, it provides her adversaries with precisely the evidence needed to prosecute her and her lover Vivaldi. In the eyes of the law, her veil signifies only a crime: despite her pleas of innocence and regardless of her 'true' name, background and personal circumstance, the veil defines her as a nun who has violated her vows and broken the law by attempting to marry. For this crime, Vivaldi must face the Inquisition. Similarly, the veil also causes mistaken identity, obfuscates truth and obscures the wearer's personhood in the Bleeding Nun sub-narrative of *The Monk*. The Bleeding Nun is a numinous figure whose 'true' identity – the spirit of an adulterous murderer – is unrecognized in the past and misrecognized in the present.

In this respect, Eve Sedgwick's observation that in *The Monk*, 'veil and flesh' are almost indistinguishable and her comment that 'characters in Gothic novels fall in love as much with women's veils as with women' is especially useful.³⁹ The veil is a symbol of seduction that signifies to the world the two classic contradictory qualities associated with feminine appeal: allure and modesty. The veil is also a source of other kinds of female subjection: it invites the public gaze and entices male viewers. In other words, it invites the very same kind of subjectification that the *uncovered* female face typically does. As we have seen, Ambrosio is consumed by 'a desire secretly to see the face of his pupil,' the disguised Matilda (67); similarly, the opening paragraph of Radcliffe's novel presents a Vivaldi tortured by 'a most painful curiosity' to 'obtain a view of the features' of Ellena, 'which excited

his curiosity' (5). So we return to that word then: 'curiosity.' Curiosity – whether sexual or scientific – is a will to know. In the face of such a desire, the veil and the gendered norms it represents – whether female modesty, sexual innocence or seductive mystery – are incapable of defending the wearer against the world. The will to know inspires visual recognition; visual recognition satisfies curiosity by allowing the viewer to categorize, and thereby to at least seem to have control over the object under surveillance.

IV. Tracing Trajectories: From Enlightenment Science to the fMRI

Thus far, I have traced the connection between the trope of disguise—in some of its many forms—and a scientific tradition that seeks a biological basis for behaviour. Radcliffe, Lewis and Dacre (and in the next century, Stoker, Stevenson and George Eliot) offer critiques of a scientific tradition (and the naturalized attitudes that attend it), which is in danger of reducing the human to a sum of his or her parts. Looking back to the eighteenth century, it may seem fairly easy to identify a tendency to biological reductionism, but it is important to recognize cultural continuities. We should make efforts to distinguish the deeply embedded historical trajectories running through modern medical science. From the age of Enlightenment to the twenty-first century, physiognomists, phrenologists, criminologists, eugenicists, evolutionary biologists and neuroscientists have searched and continue to search for biological bases of intelligence and character, criminality and aggression.

Alongside the emergence of modern medicine and its concomitant technologies there has also been a history of critical assessment, very often articulated in gothic art and literature. In different ways *The Italian*, *The Monk* and

Zofloya illustrate the view, voiced in the late eighteenth-century by the famous anatomist and surgeon John Hunter, that ‘the mind and the formation of the body do not necessarily correspond ... the mind does not arise out of the formation of the parts.’⁴⁰ A similar point was made in 1829 by the anti-phrenologist John Wayte, who argued for a similar separation of mind and body; he rejected, among other things, phrenological attempts to link the size of the skull to intelligence (something certain researchers still attempt to do today). The only way of understanding the individual, Wayte argues, is ‘to *inquire* respecting the individual’s constitution, degree of exercise of certain organs, his education, and situation in life’ and not through scientific formulas or craniological blueprints.⁴¹ It seems to me that, in different ways, many gothic novelists identified a similar danger in sacrificing the idea of unique personhood – a concept so long in the making – to sciences which seem to want to reduce the human in an effort to make the body transparent. The novels of Radcliffe, Lewis and Dacre challenge everyday practice and scientific tendencies to categorize and define individuals based upon their biology, whether external appearance or internal physiology. There is no doubt that post-enlightenment medical science has had – and continues to have – the best of intentions and aims: scientists aspire to increase longevity, to identify the sources of pathology, to cure disease, to understand criminality and to enhance human wellbeing. Yet we must always consider what might be lost in the pursuance of such goals.

- ¹ W. Michael Bird and Lynda A. Clayton, *An American Health Dilemma: A Medical History of African Americans and the Problem of Race: Beginnings to 1900* (New York, Routledge, 2000), p. 215.
- ² Ludmilla Jordanova, 'The Art and Science of Seeing in Medicine: Physiognomy 1780-1820,' in *Medicine and the Five Senses*, ed. W. F. Bynum and Roy Porter, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993) pp. 122-133, p. 125.
- ³ Richard T. Gray, *About Face: German Physiognomical Thought from Lavater to Auschwitz*, (Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2004), p. xvii.
- ⁴ Stoichita, Victor, from Turner, Christopher, 'A Short History of the Shadow: An Interview with Victor I. Stoichita,' in *The Cabinet* 24 (Winter 2006/07), <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/24/stoichita.php>.
- ⁵ The first English Essays were translated by Henry Hunt, published by the radical Joseph Johnson and edited by Thomas Holloway. A second translation, by the radical playwright, novelist and defendant in the 1795 treason trials, Thomas Holcroft, appeared in 1798. In this essay, I refer to both the Hunter and Holcroft editions.
- ⁶ Lavater, *Essays*, tr. Hunter, p. 20.
- ⁷ Barbara Maria Stafford, *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (Cambridge, MA, and London, MIT Press, 1991), p.2.
- ⁸ J C Lavater, *Essays on physiognomy; for the promotion of the knowledge and the love of mankind*, tr. Thomas Holcroft (London, G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1789), vol. 1, p.11.
- ⁹ Lavater, *Essays*, tr. Holcroft, vol. 1, p.11.
- ¹⁰ J L Austin, *How to do things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson, 3rd ed. (Oxford, Clarendon, 1979).
- ¹¹ author unknown, 'Preface,' *The Physiognomist's Own Book: an introduction to physiognomy; drawn from the writings of Lavater* (Philadelphia, James Kay, jun. & Brother; Pittsburgh, C.H. Kay & Co., 1841).
- ¹² qtd. in Jordanova, p. 128.
- ¹³ Lavater, *Essays*, tr. Holcroft, vol. 1, p. 229.
- ¹⁴ Lavater, *Essays*, tr. Holcroft, vol. 1, p. 63-4. Although this might appear as a rather simplistic diagnosis and hardly the stuff of science, at other times Lavater's analyses were much more nuanced and subtle.
- ¹⁵ Lavater, *Essays*, tr. Holcroft, vol. 1, p. 25.
- ¹⁶ Lavater, *Essays*, tr. Holcroft, vol. 1, p. 184.
- ¹⁷ Charlotte Dacre, *Zofloya* (1806) ed. Adriana Cracuin, (Peterborough, Broadview, 2003), p. 43.
- ¹⁸ Stafford, p. 103.
- ¹⁹ Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian* (1797) (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 49. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers will follow in brackets.
- ²⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: Birth of the Prison*, tr. Alan Sheridan (NY, Vintage, 1995).
- ²¹ Matthew Lewis, *The Monk* (1796), ed. D. L. Macdonald & Kathleen Scherf (Peterborough, Broadview, 2004), p. 67. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers will follow in brackets.
- ²² R. Kukla, *Mass Hysteria: Medicine, Culture, and Mother's Bodies* (Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Pub., 2005), p. 36.
- ²³ Lavater, tr. Hunter, vol. 2, p. 97.
- ²⁴ E. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 10th ed. (London, J. Dodsley, 1791), p. 114.
- ²⁵ Dacre, p. 190.
- ²⁶ Dacre, p. 187.
- ²⁷ Holtzmann-Kevlas, Bettyann, *Naked to the Bone: Medical Imaging in the Twentieth Century* (New Brunswick, Rutgers UP, 1997), qtd. in José van Dijck, *The Transparent Body: A Cultural Analysis of Medical Imaging* (Seattle, U of Washington P, 2005), p. 6.
- ²⁸ van Dijck, p. 7.
- ²⁹ E. Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'The Character in the Veil: Imagery of the Surface in the Gothic Novel,' *PMLA*, 96:2 (1981), 255-270, 262.
- ³⁰ Thomas Stone, *The Evidences against the System of Phrenology, being the substance of a paper read at an extraordinary meeting of the Royal Medical Society of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, n.p., 1828), p. 85, my italics.
- ³¹ Thomas Carlyle, 'Signs of the Times' (1829), (Harmonsworth, Penguin, 1971), rpt. 1984 pp. 61-

84, p. 67.

³² author unknown, 'Preface,' *The Physiognomist's Own Book*.

³³ J. Lyon, "The Science of Sciences": Replication and Reproduction in Lavater's *Physiognomics*, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 40: 2 (Winter 2007), p. 267.

³⁴ Lavater, *Essays*, tr. Hunter, vol. 1, p. 120.

³⁵ Spurzheim, Lecture I, *The Lancet*, 1825; qtd. in Thomas Stone, *Observations on the Phrenological Developments of Burke, Hare, and other atrocious murderers; measurements of the heads of the most notorious thieves confined in the Edinburgh jail and Bridewell, and of various individuals, English, Scotch, and Irish, presenting an extensive series of facts subversive of phrenology, read before the Royal Medical Society of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, Buchanan et al., 1829), p. 33-34. I include the long title here as it neatly explicates Stone's research and his argument that the body does not provide evidence of criminality.

³⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* tr. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 181.

³⁷ Deleuze & Guattari, p. 180.

³⁸ Deleuze & Guattari, p. 170.

³⁹ Sedgwick, p. 257.

⁴⁰ J. Hunter, *Essays and Observations on Natural History, Anatomy, Physiology, Psychology, and Geology, being Hunter's Posthumous Papers*, ed. Richard Owen, 2 vols. (London, Van Hoorst, 1861), 1:248.

⁴¹ J. Wayte. *Anti-Phrenology; or observations to prove the fallacy of ... a modern doctrine of the human mind, called phrenology* (Lynn-Regis, 1829) p. 40.